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Urban Renewal Versus Rehabilitation - Case of Fuencarral Social Housing Estates in Madrid

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Abstract

Nowadays, one of the main concerns in the urban agenda of the European Union and Member States is how to adopt an integrated approach to urban challenges and needs of the consolidated city, in particular, to address the complex condition of multi-deprived neighbourhoods. Beyond the strategic integrated approaches based on economic interests perceived within the European Union, the disadvantage condition of multi-deprived areas requires an active and consistent implication of the diversity of urban players, including the affected communities themselves. This paper pursues to contribute to this urban challenge with a reflection about the social implications of massive remodelling or re-development operations of deprived localities in comparison with rehabilitation projects eluding the whole demolition-reconstruction processes. For this purpose, the social housing estates A, B and C of Fuencarral in Madrid are taken as reference case studies that represent an important lesson of the recent history of the City and the Remodelling Operation of neighbourhoods in Madrid. Fuencarral A and B units, built as temporal settlements in the late 60s, have undergone a massive remodelling intervention that has lasted more than expected; in fact, some residents complain that it is not yet concluded after more than two decades. While Fuencarral C, with somewhat higher standards, is a protected area on the General Urban Development Plan 1997 and declared as an Integrated Rehabilitation Zone (ZRI) in 2008.

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The social implications of both intervention approaches, put into question the validity of the planning instruments applied in these areas in order to improve the quality of life of these neighbourhoods, and the paradoxical consequences of different levels of urban protection established in each case, if one considers all dimensions of the complex conditions of these areas and not only the physical or spatial issues.

1. Introduction

Considering the challenges in managing the social implications of the transformation of urban areas, especially in the case of the most vulnerable neighbourhoods, the aim of this study is to highlight the social issues of different approaches to housing and slum upgrading with the ultimate purpose of encouraging innovations in the management of these processes, learning from the mistakes of real case studies. For this purpose, it has been followed a descriptive and a comparative analysis of the process of transformation in three residential areas in the District of Fuencarral in Madrid. In two of them it has been conducted a process of demolition and replacement of housing, included within the second phase of the Remodelling Operation of peripheral neighbourhoods in Madrid, and in the third one, a rehabilitation and conservation process. The starting information comes from the knowledge generated in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) process in Fuencarral A and B after the remodelling process conducted between 2006 and 2007 [1, 2], in which the author was involved as member of the Driving Group. This information has been up-dated thanks to field work conducted recently, in February 2016, based on reconnaissance visits and in-depth interviews to key informants.

2. The Remodelling Operation of peripheral neighbourhoods in Madrid

In the recent history of Madrid an interesting experience stands out in citizen participation in urban planning and neighbourhood improvement, the 'Remodelling Neighbourhoods Operation'.

This strategy pursues to coordinate a whole remodelling action of marginal housing areas (slums and self-built settlements) and public social housing promotions built to absorb the huge rural migration of previous decades. Overall, the neighbourhoods selected in this Operation were built hastily with low quality standards [3, 4, 5, 6]. Since then, the urban development of Madrid has changed the position of these areas. Originally, they were located in the periphery of the City with accessibility and isolation problems, but now are well-connected although still stigmatized [1, 2]. A resident of Fuencarral settlement describes this change just like this in 2006: *'We were displaced outside the city and now we are standing over gold'*.

This Operation was the response of the authorities to the citizens' demands to improve their neighbourhoods. In order to deal with this situation, the State established the Remodelling Operation and the necessary structures and legal basis to act in 28 slums, but not re-locating the residents in the new periphery as was planned initially, due to citizens' protests [7, 8].

The Operation started in the late 70's and concluded in the late 80's. But shortly after its approval, other areas in similar conditions requested the same treatment and the Remodelling was extended in 1986 to other 8 suburbs. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the XXI century, the remodelling was not completed in most of them, such as the case of Fuencarral social housing estates [1, 2, 7].

During these decades, the Operation has undergone different problems, mainly due to execution times, private tenure and different interests between communities and institutions. The main difference between the two stages is the change in the political context and the level of experience of the institutions and civil organizations. In the last period the involvement of neighbourhood associations has been limited and they have become bare negotiators [1, 2, 7].

3. Cases 1 and 2: Fuencarral A and B Settlements of Absorption

3.1. The origins of Fuencarral A and B

Fuencarral A was built on land expropriated from the original town of Fuencarral at the left side of the Road to Irún, called nowadays Llano Castellano Avenue. The architect Francisco Sáenz de Oiza, designed a ring of buildings

with green spaces inside plus a green ring around the built area. It was surrounded by a peripheral fast-track road with two access points that opposed each other [5].

Fuencarral B was planned on the right side of Llano Castellano Avenue next to an industrial area, enclosed between a fast-track road and the activities of a productive area with stores and factories. The architect Alejandro de la Sota designed a kind and respectful solution considering the inhabitant's lifestyles, reinterpreting the structure of a rural town. In front of the industrial area collective buildings were placed as a protection of the single-family houses grouped around public spaces [5].

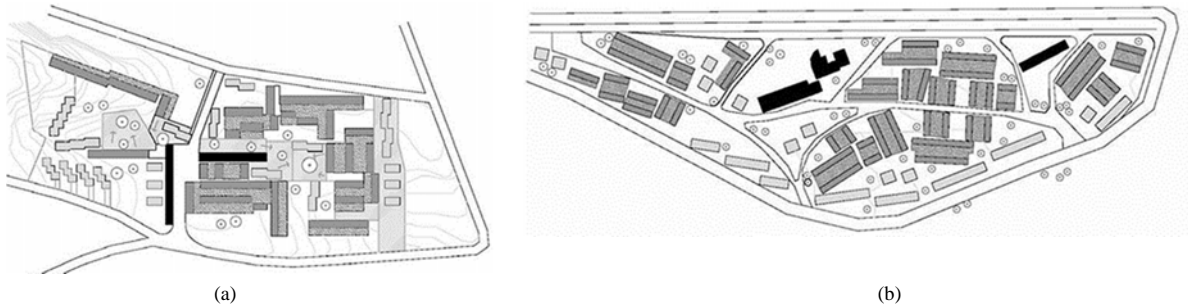


Fig. 1. (a) Fuencarral A: Master Plan. Planner: Francisco J. Sáenz de Oiza. Source: Otro Hábitat, 2007; (b) Fuencarral B: Master Plan. Planner: Alejandro de La Sota. Source: Otro Hábitat, 2007.

3.2. A story of an endless remodelling

The process has been extended throughout 20 years and although the starting conditions have changed, the initial planning approach has remained.

On the one hand, the fact that a total renovation process has lasted so long has affected the social cohesion and also led to tensions between different interests, especially in times of demolitions, allotments and relocations. Moreover, since the urbanization works have been left to the end of the process, it generated a sense of abandonment and permanent 'under construction' image [1, 2, 7], as shown in Figure 2.



Fig. 2. (a) Fuencarral A: photograph taken during one of the demolitions. Source: Otro Hábitat, 2007; (b) Fuencarral B: photograph of some blocks closed during the resettlements. Source: Otro Hábitat, September 2006.

On the other hand, the lack of well-connected public spaces within the area and with the network of public spaces in the city, constrains the inter-relations with nearby areas. Moreover, recent urban operations, such as the Operation Chamartín aimed to extend to the north the Paseo de la Castellana, have not considered the potential of these areas [1,

2]. It is also essential to remark the effect of population's stagnation. These temporally social promotions, under the promise of new houses, kept practically a fixed population. But the Remodelling intervention programmed more social housing in these areas and the arrival of new neighbours was seen at that moment controversial but also as an opportunity [1, 2].

Nowadays, after a long remodelling full of irregularities that question the administration role, the situation is still complicated mainly due to the differences between the City and the Regional Councils. Moreover, the mismanagement of the social implications has intensified the problems of local coexistence and generated a widespread rejection of the role and power played by the neighbourhood association.

4. Cases 3: The directed settlement of Fuencarral C

4.1. The origins of Fuencarral C

Fuencarral C was built in 1958 thanks to a program aimed at promoting cheap social housing launched by the National Housing Institute. This is a project of the architect José Luis Romany Aranda, a recognized architect of the moment, who designed 1,839 social housing, 138 stores, 3 markets and an educational Center.



Fig. 3. a) Fuencarral C: photograph of both experimental minimum housing: high-rise blocks and single-family housing. Source: Otro Hábitat, September 2006; b) Fuencarral C. photograph taken during a reconnaissance visit to the degraded shopping arcades. Source: Otro Hábitat, February 2016.

The project follows a rational scheme of a minimum housing model repeated in an orderly manner and only the indispensable architectural and landscape elements, shown in Figure 3a. The buildings are organized within a perimeter road that links a number of inner cul-de-sac streets. Thus, the blocks and row houses are organized around traffic-free public spaces that are adapted to the terrain, which are connected by a series of stairs and green spaces [5].

4.2. A story of the rehabilitation of a protected urban area

In 2008, as a result of neighbourhood pressures, Fuencarral C was declared an Integrated Rehabilitation Zone (ZRI). This facilitated getting additional funds for the integral rehabilitation of housing buildings. However, the fact that it is a social housing unit protected in the General Urban Development Plan imposes significant constraints that hinder the adaptation and/or modernization of the blocks.

In recent years it has been created a citizen platform called 'Los Pobladores', a self-managed group of residents with the support of experts from various disciplines, interested in participating actively in the definition of the bases

for the rehabilitation of the area and the review of the allocation of resources, taking advantage of the new Spanish Law on Rehabilitation, Regeneration and Urban Renewal (Law RRRU 8/2013), which establishes the legal basis to promote the rehabilitation of homogenous urban areas.

This group complains about the problems caused by the lack of streets and green areas cleaning and maintenance, the lack of playgrounds and stores and the problems of accessibility and mobility in a neighbourhood with 80% of the population over 65 years.

In spring 2015, this citizen platform sought the support of the Professional Association of Architects of Madrid (COAM). As a response, the COAM promoted an ideas competition for the rehabilitation and restoration of Fuencarral C and included in the jury some residents. The prize was awarded to the Project 'Romany Culture' from the architects Ismael Amarouch and Carlos Robledo. The strength of this proposal is that proposes the integration of the improvements that the residents have made in their homes during these years, achieving a great approval from them that are against the restrictive conservation normative.

Nowadays, it is an area with many vested interests, which causes criticisms in nearby neighbourhoods.

5. Results

The particular cases of Fuencarral A, B and C Units display an interesting discussion about the social implications of a large scale remodelling versus an urban rehabilitation.

Fuencarral A and B areas had undergone a remodelling operation conditioned by the requirements of the level of environmental protection given by the General Urban Development Plan to these estates, that permits demolitions but not to change the footprint of the original buildings. As a result, new high-rise buildings have replaced the single-family row houses, but not considering previous social ties. A radical change that after more than twenty years still has problems to solve related to ownership and construction works reception. During the process there have been significant failures in the management of the social implications of the spatial transformation, which has caused adaptation problems among older people, and has intensified the conflicts between neighbours, i.e., between those who were for or against the remodelling in the terms established by the administration, and between those involved or not with the neighbourhood association.

Whilst Fuencarral C, with better construction and urban quality standards, is following an urban rehabilitation process that allows demolitions only due to buildings' security and structural issues. The value of the urban fabric and buildings has been protected, but without thinking about the people who live there, and many residents have had to move to other neighbourhoods due to accessibility issues and the difficulties to upgrade substandard housing.

6. Conclusions

These experiences show the social implications of a misconceived and mismanaged urban regeneration planning. A protection scheme more adaptable to each context would be desirable, considering the physical but also the social reality. This requires more flexible and dynamic planning and governance instruments, as well as better coordination mechanisms and participatory arenas and more practice in community engagement.

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